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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000043

SIPDIS

SECSTATE FOR EUR/CACEN (PERRY) AND SIPDIS

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TAGS: ECON ENRG EPET KIRF PHUM PREL SCUL TX

SUBJECT: DAS BRYZA MEETING WITH FM MEREDOV

Classified By: AMBASSADOR TRACEY JACOBSON FOR REASONS (1.4 B, D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On January 13, following a meeting with President Niyazov (septel) Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov hosted a working lunch for visiting DAS Matthew Bryza and Ambassador Jacobson. During the lunch, Bryza pressed for concrete progress on religious freedom and academic exchanges for Turkmenistani students. DAS Bryza also solicited Meredov's ideas on specific ways Turkmenistan might contribute to Europe's efforts to diversify its gas supplies, perhaps including through a proposed Trans-Caspian Pipeline. Meredov expressed great interest in cooperating with the U.S. to develop a trans-Caspian gas pipeline and suggested forming a bilateral working group. DAS Bryza cautioned that assembling of the elements of a trans-Caspian pipeline would require a level of cooperation between the U.S. and Turkmenistan that would be difficult to achieve without progress on all three of our sets of interests: freedom through reform, security, and energy/regional economic cooperation. END SUMMARY.

ENERGY ISSUES

¶2. (C) After discussing lingering problems on education and religious freedom (see below), DAS Bryza said that the U.S. and its European partners were now more actively seeking ways to help Europe diversify energy supplies, especially natural gas. Turkmenistan could play an important role, especially given President Niyazov's statement earlier in the day (SEPTEL) that he would inform his Russian interlocutors during his upcoming trip to Moscow that Turkmenistan will not sell all its gas to one buyer (read Gazprom). DAS Bryza asked Meredov and Ahmed Calik (who also attended the lunch at Meredov's invitation and who is CEO of Calik Holding, a major player in Turkmenistan's economy) what they thought were the necessary steps needed to attract investors to a possible trans-Caspian gas pipeline. Calik suggested Calik Energy was interested in leading a consortium of investors in such a pipeline. To succeed, such a consortium would need participation by a U.S. company and OPIC. He stressed the importance of showing the U.S. flag to help mitigate political risk associated with the project, especially in light of expected arguments from Russia that a trans-Caspian gas pipeline could/should not be built due to environmental concerns and the lack of delineation of national boundaries in the Caspian Sea. Calik was confident the project could be commercial, given the higher prices for natural gas now prevailing in Europe in comparison with the late 90's.

¶3. (C) DAS Bryza replied that securing OPIC participation in such a project would require the U.S. and Turkmenistan to elevate their cooperation on democracy and human rights to build support throughout the U.S. Government, including in

Congress. DAS Bryza suggested the U.S. might work with the countries along the prospective transit route and with consuming countries in Southern Europe to explore the feasibility of a trans-Caspian pipeline. Calik agreed with this approach, suggesting that the U.S. and Turkmenistan build on their previous experience exploring such a project during the late 1990's. Foreign Minister Meredov echoed President Niayzov's suggestion from earlier in the day that the U.S. and Turkmenistan form a working group on energy security to explore this project, as well as possible exports of Turkmenistani electricity to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

OUTSTANDING ISSUE #1: EDUCATION

¶4. (C) DAS Bryza noted to Meredov that the USG attached high importance to its educational exchanges with Turkmenistan, and that he was concerned with the number of problems that existed. Ambassador said that the Embassy was trying to work with the Ministry of Education to resolve all outstanding issues, but the Ministry was unwilling to do so. Ambassador further noted that there has not been any movement on the PEAKS exchange program, despite the fact that the embassy submitted all required documentation to the Ministry of Education two years ago, and that three educational working groups have met with no results. The lack of a new Education Minister also made cooperation difficult. Meredov recognized these problems, and offered the services of the MFA to resolve future problems. He hinted that an agreement could also be reached on the PEAKS program, and offered to discuss the issue later in January. Ambassador expressed thanks for the MFA's offer, but also pressed for better cooperation with the Ministry of Education, which enjoyed primary

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responsibility for these issues.

¶5. (C) Ambassador also expressed concerns with the Ministry of Education's interference with this year's current recruitment of FLEX participants. The Ministry of Education's delayed permission to begin recruitment, and its efforts to allow local officials to sit in on interviews, have caused significant problems during this year's recruitment of FLEX participants. Nobody, including officials of the Turkmenistani and U.S. Governments, has the right to interfere in the process. Meredov explained that local teachers knew their students better than others, and would be in a position to determine whether their students would be able to be qualified applicants or might face emotional problems while abroad. In order to ensure that FLEX recruitment did not interfere with ongoing classes, Meredov said that this would not be a problem in the future if the Embassy submitted a proposed schedule of interviews to the GOTX in August. Ambassador noted embassy routinely did so, to no avail. Ambassador added that Turkmenistani participants on exchange programs most often are the best students in their classes; something that the FM should be very proud of. FM Meredov reiterated his pledge to work with the Embassy to resolve these issues.

OUTSTANDING ISSUE #2: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

¶6. (C) DAS Bryza underscored to FM Meredov how important religious freedom was for the United States. While Turkmenistan was able to avoid CPC designation last year due to specific steps it had taken, he did not know whether Turkmenistan would be in the same position this year, absent concrete progress on ending harassment of religious groups and several other issues. FM Meredov said that the GOTX has actively been working with the embassy on religious freedom issues for over two years now, and that several laws had been changed allowing for more religious freedom, adding that the GOTX registered four religious groups in 2004 and five in

2005, and that six Jehovah's Witnesses were granted exemption from military service. There are currently 119 registered houses of worship (90 Muslim, 13 Russian Orthodox, and 9 Evangelical/Hare Krishna). The GOTX works very closely with the embassy on religious freedom issues, as was seen during the October 2005 roundtable of government agencies and religious groups to discuss religious freedom issues.

¶17. (C) Ambassador informed FM Meredov that despite these steps, problems remained. Recalling the efforts of local officials in Turkmenabat to denounce local Baptists in a public display in December, Ambassador reminded Meredov that such incidents only make the calls to designate Turkmenistan a CPC stronger. Although the MFA had been helpful in resolving the December incident in Turkmenabat, local officials must be made aware that their actions will have serious consequences.

¶18. (C) DAS Bryza reiterated the USG's opposition in principle to requiring religious groups to register. The GOTX's approach to the Roman Catholic Church was particularly puzzling, given that this was a rather well known organization, given its 2000-year history. Meredov replied that the law on religion applied to all religious organizations. The ball was now in the Catholic Church's court, which had submitted registration documents to the Vatican for approval. Once the GOTX received the registration forms, Meredov promised that the Roman Catholic Church would be registered. Ambassador suggested that another positive step would be to allow an official delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses to visit Turkmenistan and meet with their co-religionists.

CENTRAL ASIAN REORGANIZATION INTO SCA

¶19. (C) Ambassador took the opportunity to inform Meredov of the Department's plans to move Turkmenistan and other Central Asian republics from the European Bureau to the South Asian Bureau in order to create a new South Central Asian Bureau. This move potentially could provide Turkmenistan more attention more high-level USG attention and visits (as well as more scrutiny), as it will be one of 11 countries in its new bureau, as opposed to one of 55 countries in the EUR bureau. Meredov welcomed the opportunity to receive more USG visitors to Turkmenistan.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) DAS Bryza's meeting with Meredov and Calik yielded
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several promises by Meredov to resolve issues pertaining to academic exchanges and religious freedom. It also built on the opening President Niyzov provided earlier in the day to explore a trans-Caspian gas pipeline and possible energy exports from Turkmenistan to South Asia. Such cooperation, especially given the expressed desire for OPIC participation, might also provide a new hook for us to push for greater reforms in Turkmenistan. Given recent events in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, Turkmenistan is eager to look for alternative routes to bypass Gazprom's obstructionism. END COMMENT.

¶10. (U) DAS BRYZA CLEARED THIS CABLE.

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